Interview with Joseph Vaghi, 6th Naval Beach Battalion, lieutenant and beachmaster, Easy Red Beach, present at Omaha Beach, 6 June 1944. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, 17 November 1999. (1920-2012)

When did you join the Navy?

In June of 1942. I enlisted in the Navy up in Boston. I was then a student at Providence College in Rhode Island. The draft board in Bethel, Connecticut, where I was born, was after me and I didn't want to be drafted. I would like to have finished college, so I went to the Navy and said, "May I enlist now, and I'll be out of school in 6 months." So they allowed me to do that. I enlisted in June of '42 and then reported for duty in January of '43.

Where did you go for boot camp?

I went to the midshipmen school at Notre Dame, in South Bend, Indiana, under the V-8 program and was there for 4 months. They called us 90-day wonders. We made it in 4 months, and was commissioned an ensign in 19 May 1943.

You didn't go to Camp Bradford right after that did you?

I ended up directly from Notre Dame. I was assigned to the Philadelphia Navy Yard. I showed up there long enough to get my orders, which sent me to Cape May, New Jersey. We did some small boat training there for just a short period of time. It turned out I used to get so seasick that I stayed ashore until new orders came in. And they sent me down to Camp Bradford, which is near Virginia Beach.

I went there and that's where the organization of the 6th Beach Battalion took place. It was not commissioned as the 6th Beach Battalion until later on, but in essence we were in the Amphibious Forces. By the way, at midshipman school at Notre Dame, everyone wanted to go on large ships--battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers and so forth.

They put in for that; well, that's what we wanted to do, but I think 90 percent of us went into the Amphibious Forces because I ran into classmates of mine all over the place.

When you got to Camp Bradford, what did you see?

When it was Camp Bradford I said, well, here we go. As a youngster, I had gone to the civilian military training camp up in Massachusetts. And that was the time they had the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) Camps. You've probably heard of them. I lived in tents, and I said, "Here we are in the same old tents, here at Camp Bradford." We were told that we would be organized, and we would be working with the Army.

There were these large areas with canvas tents. I think there were about eight or nine of us in a tent. They had an organizational chart set up. So many people had to be in this group, so many in that. They split us up and put us into different groups. They had three companies, A, B, and C. I don't think it was called the 6th Beach Battalion at the time, but it was a beach battalion.

I was put into C Company, and platoon 8. There were three platoons per company. They made me the guy in charge. They called me Beachmaster.

We began building our group around the discipline that was extended to us by the people in charge. We had a strange fellow who was the commanding officer at the time, a fellow by the name of Shearer, and he was a bit strange, so much so that at one point he wanted us to police the beach area.

So we took our platoon and the whole company down to police it. We were picking up sticks and papers and this and that. There were great big cast iron pipes and logs and other things. He came down in his jeep and said, "Why are these still here?" He wanted us to lift those damn things. It would have taken a bulldozer to move them, but he wanted us to do it. He also said he wanted to have a great big tarpaulin painted, showing "disaster on the beach." He said, "We will fool the enemy. What we'll do is unroll this canvas. And then they'll come over with their airplanes and see that there's absolute chaos on the beach. We'll be moving ahead in good health, but they'll get the idea that we're in bad shape."

Were you an ensign then?

I was a brand new ensign, just commissioned on May 27, 1943.

How long did this training last there at Camp Bradford?

I think we were there probably 6 weeks or so. I'm not sure. Then we went down to Fort Pierce, Florida. There we really did an awful lot of organization. We polished up; we became the 6th Beach Battalion. CDR Carusi came in as our commander. He was not at Camp Bradford. He came in down at Fort Pierce.

We worked with the Army. We did an awful lot of hiking. We did a lot of work on boats going out and landing craft. We would go out at 3 o'clock in the morning, after walking a couple of miles to get to the area where we would, what they called the mock up. We would go up a rope ladder, and then down into the landing craft. Those landing craft had gasoline engines, and boy, they really made you sick.

What kind of engines were they?

Paul Scott was the name. It was like a Packard engine.

Were these the LCVPs?

Yes. They were the early version with a very little ramp that would come off the front. We would go out in those things and circle around maybe for an hour or two, out in the marsh, in an area in what they called the departure line. And then at a given signal, we'd turn and head for the beach and we'd make the landing, get off the beach and set up our operations that we would plan on doing.

When I say set up our activities, we had a medical section, a communication section, a hydrographic section, and a boat repair section. There were three sections in each platoon. And so when we would go in, the communication people would set up their radios, or semaphore flags or markers, to show where other boats that are coming in, were to land. With the medical section, certain people were told, all right, you're a patient and the medical section would take care of them.

With the hydrographic, they would put buoys and markers out in the water. And the boat repair section, some of these boat coming in would get swamped, or they would broach, meaning that they would come on the beach and they were not able to get off. We would get a bulldozer to push them off and that sort of thing. So it was very intense training.

Did you get weapons training too?

Yes. We went down to West Palm Beach, where they had firing ranges. And we fired there. Also we used the 20mm Oerlickon.

They had drones flying over and we'd be shooting at them. So we had a bit of training in almost every field.

Small arms, M1s, and carbines?

Yes, yes. The Springfield rifles were quite popular. I had both a carbine and a .45. The training was very good. We did an awful lot of marching and a lot of obstacle course, because we had to get ready. Some of the men who came were told, "Listen, you're going to be in the Beach Party."

Now they didn't know what a Beach Party was. They brought men in from various parts of the Navy because a lot of the fellows who volunteered to come into the Navy, those who were drafted into the Navy. And at that time they were looking for personnel for this specific type of thing because the Beach Battalions were set up specifically for the landing, both in North Africa, Sicily, and Anzio. And finally in our area.

The definition of what your mission was for the Beach Battalion would be the specialties that were required to successfully land the infantry on the beach.

Not only to land the infantry and anyone else that had come ashore, but to control all the vessels coming in, tell them where to land. Also arrange for the evacuation of the wounded, the prisoners, and anything else that had to go from shore to ship. But we were in charge of all that. And we worked with the Army people very closely. Of course, we had a company commander who in our case was LT Cliburn. And he had liaison with the Army captain who was in the Engineers' Special Brigade. LT Cliburn would then pass word on to the different beachmasters, as to what we ought to be doing, etc. But the training was very, very extensive. And one of the things that I did in putting together the questionnaire for the Operation Rescue. I asked each of the fellows to give us his evaluation of how we prepared ourselves for the chore that was going to be ours to handle, which was the landing in Normandy. All of them, almost without question, said we had good training. And it was very disciplined.

The men came from every walk of life, every age. Two or three fellows were older then I was. I was 23 years old. And I figured, gee, I'm 23 years old and I have 43 men and two officers under me. That kind of blew my mind, but I didn't think about it. Really, you don't think about these things while you're there. You do things, you say things, and hopefully a lot of it is based on the training that you had. Apparently my parents did a decent job because I always seemed to get some of the very important things that ought to be done. If you bilged out of Midshipmen School, they sent you to Great Lakes and you became a seaman 2nd class and you started from there. And it would be a very embarrassing thing to bilge out.

Is that what they call it, bilge out?

Yes, to be bilged out. And it would have been very embarrassing. The folks back home gave me a big party. The family was very proud. Josey's going to go in the Navy and be an officer. You know, for a small town, that's great stuff.

This was still Connecticut?

Yes, the little town of Bethel. So when I got out there after the first month, they called me down to the office. And they said, Vaghi, tell us about yourself. Everyone had to be interviewed. So I told them about myself. I was really a small greenhorn boy. And I told them everything. They called me back about 4 days later. I thought, well here's the bad news, they're

going to ship me out. They said "Vaghi, we've decided to make you battalion commander; you're in charge of the building."

When did you go to Lido Beach?

We went back to Bradford just long enough to pack up and go up to Lido Beach in Long Island. And that was around Christmas of '43. And it was cold, colder then blazes. We got there and I remember I went home one weekend before leaving. I got permission to go because Connecticut is not very far.

I grew up on the south shore of Long Island so I know that area.

Oh did you? So I got over there and lo and behold, Marian Anderson who's an opera singer, she was at the house when I got there.

At your house?

Yes. My father was a cabinetmaker and a sculptor, artisan, inventor, and everything. And he and Marian Anderson were very good friends. There were a lot of opera people who lived in the area.

I bet that was a surprise.

It was. So we went to Lido Beach. From there we went by bus or truck to New York.

To the West Side.

Well, I thought it was Pier 91, but someone wrote that we had gone over to Hoboken first, then came back. I can't figure that one out. But in any case, we went to New York, and Pier 91 or 90 where the *Mauritania* was tied up.

Now had you learned you were going to be the beachmaster?

Oh yes, I knew all along.

When did you learn that?

I was acting as beachmaster when I was . . .

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At Bradford the first time.

At Bradford the first time.

Did they tell you what your duties would be?

They had a program all written out what our duties would be.

Just for you?

For beachmaster, assistant beachmaster, medical officer. And then the breakup of the platoon. You were supposed to have a boatswain's mate that would be in charge of all of them. And then you had the radioman, the highest rank of radioman, the medical guy, and of course the doctor was a jagee, Dr. Davey. And he took care of his people. I had nothing to do with them other then they had whatever requirements were made for everybody.

So he took care of the pharmacist's mates?

Pharmacists mates. I took care of all the rest. With all the training we had, both at Bradford and down at Fort Pierce, we got a chance to loosen up. We did an awful lot of marching and giving orders. Like any organization, we got to feel one for the other. I think that was the important thing. We were brand new, right out of school. And we could drive a truck but we didn't know anything about a bulldozer so we had training in bulldozers. We learned to give orders.

So leadership was already in your blood. You had done this before.
Yes.

So being a beachmaster seemed like a logical jump for you.
Yes, the people who made selections, they recognized that. And I felt very comfortable doing it.

So you got to the pier and saw the *Mauritania*.
Yes. We got aboard and we were all assigned certain quarters. The officers had rooms. The troops were 19 stories high, down in the lower levels. And we started out . . . Now I'd completely forgotten about having the collision with a tanker until someone reminded me in reading some of the material that came my way. And at any rate, we came back, fixed the damage, and then set out for Liverpool.

We got to Liverpool in the middle of the night. In the morning, we got aboard these beautiful little trains and compartments. And my assistant beachmaster was a fellow by the name of Jack Reich, and he was from Chicago. He was a short, a little Jewish fellow, and a great sense of humor. Could tell stories on end. And he kept us entertained the whole time with all the stories. He used to work in Chicago in a department store, and had so many versions of that thing.

Jack always kept the spirit up and when things got rough, he would come up with something and we'd all have a good laugh, and we were off and running again. And I saw him in Okinawa a year later. He was on another ship there. But at any rate, we got on these trains with these strange whistles and rode for the rest of the night from Liverpool down to Salcombe down in southern England, Devon, the region of Devon. And there we set up in Quonset huts.

Again we trained and it wasn't so bad there. Out of Salcombe we had a number of landings over in Slapton Sands, one of which was very disastrous. I think it was Tiger. I never knew anything about that until, oh God, 45 years later.

Yes, it was in the 80's I think before they even made that public.
Right. I read a book. I was in England and I read this book that had just come out and in reading it, I read about these two LSTs that were sunk. And the German E Boats came out.

From Cherbourg, came across.
Yes, Cherbourg. They came across and bingo. And so we did a lot of training at Slapton Sands, and that was good training because we were working head and shoulders with the Army. And we got to know the people that we would be landing with. We didn't know where we were going of course. And we got to know them personally and we developed a camaraderie.

You had Army equipment too. You were wearing Army helmets and. . .

Army helmets.

Essentially Army uniforms, everything. You couldn't distinguish really except, I guess.

Yes, except for the markings.

For the markings on the helmets.

And of course you could always tell a Navy guy as opposed to an Army. If they're both dressed alike, they're coming down the street, the Navy guy always had a swagger. You knew it was Navy, just the way his attitude. The Army was pretty much according to the books. And a little story. From there we went north, from Swansea, we went up to Cardiff. And we were living in a camp, Army on one side of the main street, the Navy on the other.

The Army cooks would cook one week for everybody and they all ate in the same mess hall. And the following week, the Navy would cook. Well when the Army cooked, there was always food left over. When the Navy cooked they never had enough. It was just the personality of the Navy. And we had the same thing in the officers mess.

When our Navy cooks were in there, we had fresh biscuits, we had this, that and the other thing. Finally the people in charge said we don't want you cooking anymore. You make too much of a mess in the galley.

It sounds like a cultural difference.

Cultural difference. Well it became Army culture. I mean these people were good men, but they were told this is what you do. You read the book. If you're going to dig a hole for a latrine, it had to be 2 feet square and 3 feet deep, and it had to be so many feet apart. I mean, everything was by the books. The Navy didn't quite live that way you see. At least we didn't.

So you went from Swansea.

Swansea up to Cardiff.

Cardiff.

Cadiff is north, up in Wales. And there we continued our training. We really got into it. We did a lot of, not so much landing, as organizing with getting our battalion organized, our equipment and our gear and the refinements of what we were going to do.

I recall we used to have the inflated life belts that would go around. And you could just push the thing and the little canisters of carbon dioxide gas, whatever it is, would explode and keep you afloat. Now some guys complained that they kept too far down, a lot of the fellows had so much weight that the belt was around their waist. Now had the belt been somehow a little higher, probably we would not have lost so many men.

Yes. They went over and drowned.

Yes.

That happened on the those two LSTs at Slapton Sands.

Oh, is that right?

Yes. I interviewed someone who was on that, who was in one of those LSTs and survived. And he said many of them had their belts on improperly, and when they went into the water, it brought their heads down into the water and they drowned. They had the belts too low around their waists. They should have been up higher. They weren't trained right.

Well they never told us that. They also gave us buoys. One of the jobs of the hydrographics section was to put buoys out in the water. And the buoy they gave us was this great big styrofoam-like thing, about this big and this high and heavy as hell with a big pole and a light on top. And I said, this doesn't make sense; we'll never get the damn things to shore.

So I got three of those belts and hooked them together and made a triangle. And I got some 1 x 6s from the packing cases there in Cardiff. They had a big Navy place there. And I got these things and I cut them to the right length, so you make a triangle out of it. Then a batter board across the top and a batter across the bottom, with a hole in it and I had my pole stuck in it so you'd go in all collapsed.

A guy could carry the stuff in, assemble it on the beach, go out and put it in place. And then a bag and a line. You fill the bag up with sand and that was your marker. So that kind of worked but things got so screwed up on the beach.

Probably wouldn't have matter at that point anyway; there was such chaos going on.

So in any case, there was very good training up there. We got all of our gear. And we got to know very closely the Army people. As a matter of fact, we used to kid the Army because they would wear their pinks every now and then. The uniforms were kind of olive drab dress jacket and pink trousers. We used to call them the pinks.

Pink trousers.

They looked kind of pink. We called them the pinks. "Here comes the pinkies." So this pinky came over into our area one time and he asked a seaman 2nd class. He says, "Sailor, where can I find lieutenant so and so." And our guy looked at him and says, "Beats the shit out of me lieutenant, I don't know where he is." That story got around very quickly. But we had levity too, you know.

I don't recall how long we were there before we left for what we called the marshaling area. The marshalling areas were areas designated near deportation areas, like Weymouth, Portsmouth, Bristol, anywhere ships could tie up and take men aboard.

In the near vicinity were fields, large fields, and there are a lot of fields over there. They set up a camp that was highly protected against anyone coming into the area or leaving the area. Because we were made privy to a lot of information of what we were doing and when we were going to go and so forth.

So you knew?

I knew.

You knew you were going to Normandy, or you just knew you were going to France?

No, I knew we were going to Normandy. I didn't know when. And I still have my charts at home that were given us. We saw the model of the beach showing where we would land. But

we knew generally, at least I figured it out just by the tides. I mean they were very specific in giving us information of what we could expect in terms of the tidal conditions, beach conditions because they took thousands of photographs from the air. Every time they flew over someone would be taking photographs of the area you see. And so they knew that quite well. Plus the fact the British had a lot of people who were doing nothing but going in at night in submarines and getting samples of the earth, samples of the sand. Whether the make up of it was such that you could ride a truck on it. We had a lot of DUKWs for instance. Would they be bogged down or do you have to put wire mesh down. At Slapton Sands we had to put wire mesh down because the sand was so porous you'd just sink in it.

Yes, but the sand at Omaha Beach was . . .

. It had a strong consistency. You could probably build a building on it and it would hold it. And the currents were so fast, about 3 knots, and twice a day you'd rise and fall some 21 feet.

That's a big tide.

That's a heavy tide. And the spring tide is probably, maybe 22 feet I guess. But in any case, we got into our marshalling area. And here again, it was a matter of final polishing up and so forth. I had a lot of sessions with my own platoon. We had entertainment there. But we as the officers, would go, at a designated time, and be briefed on what was going on you see. So we knew where we were going and I guesstimated the exact time when we ought to be because of the tide conditions.

The weather was good while we were there and every night . . .

This would have been late May?

Yes. And every night the Germans would fly overhead and we set up our anti-aircraft, it was great pictures to see these things burning up all over. Because, my first experience, I hadn't seen that before.

Did you ever hit any of those guys going over?

Well, we were not in charge and they were pretty high up. I never saw an airplane shot out of the sky, but we had anti-aircraft, Bofers (40mm) mostly I guess.

To protect the anchorage.

Yes. So then we moved out of the marshalling area down aboard ship and went to Weymouth.

You were on an LCI?

LCIL-88 was the number. So we got there and were not privy to the notion that we got maybe some bad weather, we were going to hold up. We were supposed to go on the 5th and some of them had already started out and had to be recalled, the slower ones. So when it was our turn to leave, why we just got in line, about mid-afternoon on the 5th. But while we spent a couple of days aboard the LCIL in dock, we got to meet a lot of people.

I don't remember now, but the different platoons were tied up along side. On our ship was A.J. Liebling, who was the writer for the *New Yorker* magazine. He was quite entertaining. We played cards and shot the breeze and so forth. Going over that night, I talked about myself.

We were playing cards and I saw five aces in my hand, and I said, uh oh, it's time for me to get out of here.

So I went into our quarters and got into my bunk so as not to flash my hash, I thought I'd better stay there. And rode through the night that way.

Pretty rough?

Yes, it was rough. And here again, in trying to recall specifics, it's very difficult. My memory in reading the account that A.J. Leibling wrote, and he wrote a series of three articles. I don't know whether you've seen them. He was an observer, a newspaperman and he was more observant then the rest of us. And that was his job to report what he saw. So that was a great help. I didn't read much about it. Just looked for my own name and let it go at that. Why read what he had to say, I was there so that was about it.

You were out there all night?

All night, and early morning, we landed at 7:35.

Before that, you got to a certain point off the beach. How many miles out were you when . . ?

Well no, we went on in.

You went straight in?

Straight on in. We got to the departure line and at the hour that we were supposed to go. Our skipper, who was a fellow by the name of Bunny Riggs. He was a Washingtonian; he was Coast Guard. And CDR Carusi was a Washingtonian. I don't know if they knew each other before that or not. And it was quite providential that we were assigned to his ship. But we knew as we were going in. I said, "Well there's the house over there and it will be off our starboard bow as we're going in. And Riggs took us right in on the tide.

Right there.

And the interesting thing was that the demolition team that went in, preceded us. They had the widest gap where we were supposed to go.

Was that battalion that went in part of your outfit?

No. We had some of the First Division aboard our ship, infantry.

They had their own demolition people?

Our demolition and the Army demolition worked together.

They cleared the beach.

Cleared channels. There was supposed to be 16 channels I think, gaps. All I could see were all these obstacles that were still there. As a matter of fact, when I ran off the beach, we came in at low tide, and the thing I recall was this purple smoke.

Now purple smoke we knew by training meant fire in the hole, they're going to blow, they're going to blow something. So you hit the deck until it went up and then you moved on in. And there was fire and the shooting and machine guns were popping all over the place, so you

tried to hide behind some of the obstacles the Germans put up. There were these tetrahedrons and these big steel things. You figured that was protection so you got behind those.

When the ramp went down, the water wasn't that shallow. You were some way off the beach?

Oh, we were maybe 100 yards or more, 200 yards, I don't remember.

So there was plenty of water.

There was a long distance between where we landed and where the dune line was. It was a long distance. And I got off and the water was up to here I guess.

But there were bullets hissing around.

All around. And of course there were other people that had gone in ahead of us. And they all went in on LCVPs. We were the first LCILs to go in.

That was 88?

Yes. Our number was 88.

Significant I guess, that number?

Yes, that's right because we were being hit by '88's. [A.J.] Liebling tells the story that as we were going in, we were all lined up. The Navy was on the port side and the Army on the starboard side. And Carusi was up at the head of the line. He was our commanding officer. And Liebling observes that I went up and said something to the commander so he let me go off first. So he records that I was the first one off. That could very well have been.

Do you remember what the beach looked like from a distance before you stepped off? Looking out, what did you see out there?

Well, first of all we had some battle wagons out there shooting and there was an awful lot of smoke. And we could hear this, and you could see the shells going in. And because we were far enough out, while the battleships were firing, we were underneath and all these things were going over. And there was an awful lot of fog.

The navigator aboard our LCIL knew exactly where we had to go. There was a landmark, a house on the shore, and he knew so many points off of that house. And that's what he headed for and he took it right in. There were no obstacles in the area from low tide out to sea, so we had free rein. It was only after you got into where the tide stopped receding and starts to go in, that's where all the obstacles were. So we landed at the low tide.

And you saw the obstacles.

We saw all the obstacles. We got in rather nicely. The LCI-85, was on our port side. It hit a mine and got hit with an '88 through the front bow and eventually sank. That's another story. But in any case, we came in and we got hit. Our starboard ramp was blown off.

There were two ramps, one on port, one on starboard.

One on the starboard, one on port. And we went off on the port side. And the starboard one was the one that was blown off.

An '88 hit it?
An '88 hit it, yes. We had our work cut out for us on the beach.

It was overcast and foggy.
Overcast and foggy.

And cold, cool?
Well cool didn't mean anything.

You were wearing these chemical impregnated outfits to protect against gas attack.
Yes, my coveralls were the outer garment. It was all tied up. Everyone had a gas mask. As a matter of fact, one of the scariest . . . Actually, I think I was just a little bit too dumb to be scared going in. When I really got scared was when I heard the sound for the warning for gas. You know, little kids have crickets that make noise when a little wooden thing hits them. Someone was doing that and, my God, everybody ran for a gas mask because we didn't carry . . . This was the day after we got there and that was rather scary.

So there you are, up to your waist in water, going up the beach. And you run into these obstacles, tetrahedrons, and I guess the thing I remember about the movie "Saving Private Ryan" were the bullets hitting the steel. Did you hear all that?
Well, you heard so much, I'll be honest with you, so much was going on. I knew what I had to do. To be honest, I don't remember a heck of a lot. In one instance, our platoon set up the first communication between shore and ship. And we were sending messages out like crazy.

Was it kind of a radio?
TBX and TBYs and I don't know what the other thing was. They would crank them up and send the message out to the control vessel who then would . . . But we were sending them out in great numbers.

Where did you set up the radio? Where did you find suitable protection?
No, there was no protection.

Just right there on the beach?
Just right on the beach.

Right in the open.
Right in the open; we had no protection. We had the rocks going up the dune line, and that's where we set up. The radiomen had a lot of experience. Some of them had been in North Africa and Anzio and they were real pros. And they set up and we knew what their job was and they did it. It was about mid morning maybe. There was the corpse of a soldier on a stretcher. And another soldier came and said he wanted the stretcher. And he was about to just roll the soldier onto the ground. So, I said no, pick it up and we'll move it out of here because I want to keep this area clear for the truck traffic along the beach.

As we bent down to pick it up, Boom, there's this tremendous explosion. Someone later said that it was probably from a railroad gun the Germans had. They zeroed in on our frequency and a lot of people were killed and wounded at that time.

In that one shot, in that one explosion?

Yes. And the only man I lost in my platoon was a fellow by the name of Isbir, Andy Isbir. He was about 37 years old from McKeesport PA. He was married to this woman under the common law. And he told me before he went overseas, "You know, Mr. Vaghi, I don't think I'm every going to see my woman again." How prophetic that was.

Was he hit with that explosion you were talking about?

No, we found him underneath a jeep. So that kind of shook us all up. My clothes were on fire and I lost my helmet. So I put that out and took some gasoline tanks off the jeeps that were still burning in the area. I picked up a helmet that was lying nearby.

You were acting in your role as beachmaster by then.

Yes.

You were directing traffic?

Yes, all that sort of thing.

You were telling them where their landing craft should come in?

Right.

It must have been very confusing.

Well, you got used to it. I say you get used to it. I don't know how we got used to it. You know what you had to do. We knew we had to have these people get ashore. And our men would help some. Coming ashore they would flounder and our men would go out and help them in. I'll never forget. I had a fellow by the name of Gately. And I said, "Gately, go out and help that guy; he's in trouble."

He was one of the Army guys, pulling one of these small fieldpieces that had wheels like bicycle wheels. He was having a hell of a time. So he went out to help the guy, and came back and he had blood all over him. And he said, "Mr. Vaghi, I did what you told me but I got shot."

I remember another incident. I told a guy "I want you to go down there and find out what the bottleneck is. We're backing up here." He said, "I'm not going there, everybody is getting shot, I'm not going there. I said, Well, I'm going to tell you, if you don't go there and get shot, you're going to get shot right here by me, so go!" The guy went. I remember that because I never thought the guy would ever act that way.

Was he just hunkered down in the sand or what?

Well, he was one of the fellows that was in my platoon and I told him what I wanted him to do. He was trained to do that but I guess he was scared.

This is still the first day, in the afternoon by now?

Yes.

Traffic is moving on the beach pretty well?

Yes.

And you've gotten things under control.
Yes.

The docs are taking care of the casualties and trying to get them off the beach.
Right. One of the things that I remember was that an Army guy came up to me and he said, "Get these guys off the beach."

Meaning what, the wounded?
No, no, the Army. They weren't moving; they were all stuck right on the dune line. And they weren't moving forward. There was barbed wire and everything up above and they were hunkered down there. The more that came in, the more they would pile up. So I don't know who the guy was but he told me, he says, get them off. So I had my power megaphone and I made the announcement, I said you've got orders from the commanding general, or something, made something up.

Made something up.
Made something up I'm sure. I don't remember that specifically, but I'm sure that's the way I would have done it. The commanding general wants you to get the hell out of here. So one of these fellows, I think it was a sergeant, an Army guy, he started putting a bangalore torpedo underneath the barbed wire and they finally blew a gap in it. And he got up and said, "All right, follow me, let's go."

And I think that was the beginning of the penetration into the defenses of the big Atlantic wall the Germans put up. And one of the first ones in was a fellow by the name of Joe Dawson. He was a First Division guy. And he's credited with having been the first one to have gotten up to the top of the bluff.

How far was the bluff from where you were? Could you see it?
Oh sure, oh sure. You had the dune line, when you got up to the flat part, maybe back 50 yards or so, and then this thing goes up like that. And when I went over for the 50th anniversary, Joe Dawson gave the talk and introduced the President.

So you're up on the beach and these guys stuff the bangalore under barbed wire and they got through. And then what were you doing after that?
Well, I'm doing my work on the beach.

Still getting people down to the beach.
Oh, yes. Now, I got a letter from a fellow by the name of Hanley. He wrote me 6, 7 years ago. And I had not seen him. And he recalls when they blew the gap in the wire, and the soldiers were going through, Father Schmidt went through with them because he could hear these guys moaning, and getting hit. I mean, it was just loaded with mines.

The signs were still there, it says achtungen minen. The Germans never took the signs down. I would love to, in retrospect, to have taken one of those. But they had mines, and those signs were for the benefit of the Germans. And then we'd step on these mines.

So the signs helped you out too.

Well, just to lateral traffic. But going from the beach back to the bluff, that's where the place was heavily laden with mines.

What do you remember about that first night that you were there?

The first night. Of course the Germans came over and they would fly over. And of course everybody would shoot from the ships towards us. As a matter of fact, the second or third night, that's when our commanding officer, CDR Carusi was hit.

He was hit by anti-aircraft--friendly fire wasn't it?

Friendly fire. The Germans would come over, along the beach.

Were they strafing?

They were strafing, yes. One of the nights, when the Germans were coming in, the fellows had the foxholes. And two of my guys, one was Dandini and the other was Hanley, the Hanley that wrote. They jumped in the foxhole at the same time, one was on top of the other. And, well Hanley jumped on top of Dandini and Hanley's legs were straddling the head of Dandini, and Hanley's head was straddling the feet of Dandini. So, you know, end for end. And Hanley got a bullet right through his leg. And he was alongside of Dandini's head. Just an inch over, it would have gotten Dandini in the head. So we got some sulfadiazine and poured it on and got Dr. Davey to come over and fix him up. And then we sent him out in the morning and I never saw him again until one of our reunions. But he tells me he got out in one of these wicker stretchers.

Wire?

Wire stretchers.

Yes, they're called Stokes Litters. Like chicken wire.

So he got out there and along side of a ship, and they put a line down. There were two guys up there, one of them put a line down with a hook on the one end where the head of the stretcher is, and another guy is holding the line where the feet are. And they're pulling him up, easy by easy. And the guy who's holding the line that holds the head end, his line gives way, or he loses it.

Now the water's coming up, and he says "My God," Hanley tells me this in the letter--he says, "My God, I didn't get killed on the beach, but I think I'm going to drown out here." But they got him up all right.

What a story.

Yes, isn't that incredible. And of course there are millions of stories like that. These guys, everyone has a story to tell. They really do. You see, one of the regulations forbid people from keeping diaries. That was Navy regs. And I followed the rule. I censored an awful lot of mail from the guys that had written. But myself, I kept very little. I may have picked up little things here and there.

So the Germans came and strafed the first night.

They did it every night for 3 nights.

They did it for 3 nights.

Well I know I didn't sleep for 3 days. I kept going for 3 days. Then after that, why things kind of quieted down.

Things quieted down. Now did you get up on the bluff at all to see any of the defenses?

I did not go up on the thing until about the 19th. I've got a picture. I said to my people, I said, well, I'm going to take my jeep and I'm going to go up and see what's up on top of the hill. And I drove up and saw these people who were in a courtyard, kind of like a courtyard. Old people, young kids, chickens, dogs, so I pulled my jeep in. And I could speak a little bit of French, a little bit of Italian. Between the two, I managed to get along.

And I'm talking with them and another jeep pulls up and someone from the *Stars and Stripes* wanted to take a picture of me talking to these people and showing them the invasion money, which I did. And he took the pictures. And lo and behold, when I got back to England the *Stars and Stripes* had a picture of me with these people. And you could see I had the First Division helmet on, the one I picked up on the beach after I lost my own, and they asked me to explain to them what the invasion money was.

I had given one gal a pack of cigarettes where the Lucky Strike Green had gone to war. I don't know if you remember that phrase. Lucky Strike cigarettes used to be a green package with a red circle.

Red circle.

Red circle in the Lucky Strike. But the body of the pack was green. When the war came, they needed the coloring, or the chemicals that make up the coloring, so the packages became white. And their advertisement was, "Lucky Strike's Green has gone to war."

They stayed white.

Yes, they still are today. So you can see her holding the cigarette pack as I give them to this gal. And all the GIs who were in Europe who saw this, who knew me from my hometown, because everybody was at war, they kept sending all these things home to my family. And so when it came to the 50th Anniversary celebration, I wrote to the mayor of (unintelligible).

And I got my niece who was very proficient in French to . . . I wrote what I had to say, then she would translate it into French, and then I sent it to the mayor of each of the three towns. I said, "Please can you locate any of these people? I'm not sure where it was taken, but my beach was here," and I told them all about it. So lo and behold, French television had a man here in town who called me and said that he found two of the people who were in that picture, a little boy and the girl who I gave the package of cigarettes to. And so we arranged to meet. After the ceremony at the beach, I went to the mayor's office and met the two of them. That was very, very touching. The French television people gave me a driver and a car for the whole day. And I went to Arromanches, where the British landed. And I was on French television live. And these people that I was going to meet in the afternoon saw me on television. So after the ceremony at our beach, our driver took us to the mayor's office and we had a wonderful time.

That was back in '95 for the 50th?

Ninety-five, yes. So God's been good to me.